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Nations meet to keep Caribbean clean amid oil quest

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Caribbean nations are following the U.S. lead in stiffening oversight of offshore drilling and collaborating on oil spill response plans in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

More than 100 representatives from Caribbean countries and the oil industry will convene Thursday in Port of Spain, Trinidad to address how they might combat an offshore emergency like the one in the Gulf of Mexico two years ago.

The threat is amplified as oil exploration moves into deeper water in the area.

“All of the countries have very, very adequate — maybe even superior — programs for dealing with surface spills,” said Lee Hunt, the former president of the International Association of Drilling Contractors and the head of Open Forum, which assembled the “One Caribbean, One Response” summit.

The problem, Hunt said, lies beneath the surface. Although two U.S. consortia now provide equipment to contain runaway subsea wells in the Gulf of Mexico, those projects are limited to the region. No similar response program targets the vast Caribbean basin.

“We’ve added a third dimension to the issue with deep-water drilling, and that is depth,” Hunt said. “While their spill plans are very robust for surface spills, they are just beginning to approach that third dimension of subsea deep-water intervention.”

The conference aims to build on existing International Maritime Organization discussions — which are generally conversations among countries — and bring industry into the dialogue before an accident happens.

“Bringing together people with shared interest in developing a comprehensive spill response capability is terribly important,” said Michael Bromwich, who was the chief U.S. offshore energy regulator after the 2010 spill and is speaking at the event. “We think it’s the beginning of a process . . . that will lead to very concrete results in the near future.”

There are some potentially big disputes, including what happens to oil skimmed from multi-national waters and what spill response techniques can be used. While some countries tolerate the use of dispersants to break up crude, others are wary.



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If there were a spill in a multinational basin such as the Caribbean, a major question would be who bears liability for it.

“Everyone is real clear about who owns the oil when it’s in the reservoir,” said Kevin Ewing, a lawyer with Bracewell & Giuliani, who is speaking at the conference. But “the moment it’s actually floating on the surface, no one wants to own the oil.”

International law is hardly clear on the subject and difficult questions about who bears responsibility for cleanup and costs can get in the way of broader efforts to hammer out spill response agreements before they are needed.

Worldwide, some regional agreements include response plans for offshore spills, but no broadly applicable international agreements deal with who takes responsibility for the incidents and the costs that go along with them.

Ewing suggested that a pragmatic, approach is to focus on spill response first, with companies leading the way.

“If you have an international consortium — a consortium of companies in any particular basin that together agree on how they are going to do a collective response, you can speed progress on spill response without having to solve all the knotty problems of international pollution liability,” Ewing said. “It also makes it easier for regulators in the region to orient to a common spill response standard.”

For instance, countries in a shared basin might support the plans by a consortium of companies to deal with a spill — and then make involvement in that group a requirement for drilling in their waters. The effect would be to divest spill response from hard-to-resolve liability questions.

“Re-focusing on what’s practical and framing a commercial solution is the way to go and actually deal with the issues of spill response,” Ewing said. “If you hitch it to comprehensive international-law efforts on liability, you’ll never get the spill response part of that done.”

A host of firms with U.S. operations that stand to gain from the nascent deep-water development in the Caribbean will attend the gathering in Trinidad. They include ModuSpec and Tiger Tanks Trinidad Unlimited, a company affiliated with Tiger Offshore of Beaumont, Texas.

Helix Energy Solutions Group, which offers one of the two spill containment systems for the Gulf of Mexico, is the primary conference sponsor.

Helix spokesman Cameron Wallace said the company aims to share lessons it has learned in the Gulf — and emphasize that there is more to responding to a subsea spill than sending a containment cap to the site. Debris may have to be removed and other equipment might have to be mobilized in response.

“The main issue is the need for response assets like vessels and remote-operated vehicles in the region, being utilized regularly by experienced crews,” Wallace said. “Particularly in broader areas like the Caribbean, you can’t assume that a vessel will be available in the region to respond quickly.”

Ocean currents ensure that an oil spill near one Caribbean country can quickly affect nearby nations.

“Anything that happens in Brazil becomes French Guiana’s problem,” Hunt said. “Anything in French Guiana winds up in Trinidad. Anything in Trinidad winds up in Belize and so forth.”

“It’s the unique nature of the Gulf current and the loop current which makes any deep-water operation in the greater Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico literally everyone’s challenge,” Hunt added. “It’s a shared issue.”

Voters in the Bahamas will decide in a referendum vote next spring whether to allow offshore drilling.



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But other countries are racing forward.

In September, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago reported a strong showing with a dozen bids for five deep-water tracts.

And last year, Shell confirmed it had discovered oil in a deep-water tract off the coast of French Guiana.

Bromwich noted “the tremendous amount of interest, not from nations caribbean but all over the worl ...in developing

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